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著者名(英)	Dirk MacKenzie
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Voice-Overs: Pronunciation Practice with Video Footage

Dirk MacKenzie

Abstract

This study was an exploration of the potential of video voice-overs for pronunciation practice. A voice-over, for my purposes here, is a recording of a voice on top of the original dialogue in a video clip. My hypothesis was that by attempting to match the sound patterns of the original dialogue as closely as possible, language learners could improve their own pronunciation, stress, intonation, etc. The study consisted of eight trials in which I experimented with hardware and software available at KUIS, and fine-tuned the procedure with the help of a range of participants. I eventually hit on a system which allowed learners to hear the original voices alongside their own while recording and listening back to their voice-overs—providing prompt, individualized, feedback on their delivery without requiring a teacher. Also, I was able to produce a final product where the learners' voices replaced the original dialogue, but the background audio remained relatively intact—preserving the atmosphere of the clip and making screenings more engaging for a classroom audience. I found that my participants enjoyed recording voiceovers and perceived language-learning benefits, although many experienced technological difficulties that were frustrating. At these moments, I observed target language use breaking down. I found that, because recording a voiceover is a technologically challenging procedure, it is important that learners are properly trained with the hardware and software.

Introduction

The idea for this study came about in my first year of teaching Freshman English

(English Department) here at KUIS. The many small-group discussion activities and end-of-unit presentations were helping learners develop confidence and fluency in speaking, but I was noticing that pronunciation (also stress, intonation, etc.) was generally not improving. Some errors were common, but others were particular to certain learners. I wanted to find an activity that targeted pronunciation, and allowed 30 learners to focus on their own errors simultaneously.

Watching students working on their videos at the end of the Film Unit, I noted that most of their efforts went into writing, storyboarding, camera work and physical acting—and relatively little into perfecting the delivery of their lines. A voice-over, I thought, would be a nice alternative—working with existing video footage, learners would be able to focus completely on their vocal performance.

I began to explore the potential of video voice-overs for pronunciation practice. A voice-over, for my purposes here, is a recording of a voice on top of the original dialogue in a video clip. My hypothesis was that by attempting to match the sound patterns of the original dialogue as closely as possible, language learners could improve their own pronunciation, stress, intonation, etc.. The study consisted of eight trials in which I experimented with hardware and software available at KUIS, and fine-tuned the procedure with the help of a range of participants.

Theoretical framework

Noticing

While working towards a voice-over, students need to engage actively with the

video footage. Their ultimate success depends on their ability to notice subtleties in the actors' delivery. Schmidt (1995) has argued that there is no learning without attention. In his view, attention can be paid to different of aspects of language, and we learn the aspects that we pay attention to: "In order to acquire phonology, one must attend to phonology; in order to acquire pragmatics, one must attend to both linguistic forms and the relevant contextual features; and so forth. Nothing is free" (p. 17). I believe that a voice-over is beneficial for pronunciation because it requires a learner to pay more attention to it than usual.

Noticing the gap

In addition to paying attention to input, the project also requires participants to pay attention to their output. Swain's (1995) "output hypothesis" is a claim for the importance of language production to SLA. One of the key functions of output, according to her theory, is the "noticing/triggering function" (Swain, 2005, p. 471):

...under some circumstances, the activity of producing the target language may prompt second language learners to recognize consciously some of their linguistic problems. It may bring their attention to something they need to discover about their second language (possibly directing their attention to relevant input). (Swain, 2005, p. 474).

Thornbury referred to this process as "noticing the gap" between "the current state of their developing linguistic system, as realized in their output, and the target language system, available as input" (Thornbury, 1997, p. 326). Ellis (1995) offered the term "cognitive comparison" as a way of including the similarities

between interlanguage and target language, along with the differences (as cited in Thornbury, 1997).

With the right hardware and software, a voice-over allows students to directly compare input with their output—to hear them both clearly at the same time, rewind as necessary, and notice differences themselves.

Independent learning

This project caters to autonomous, independent learners. They can choose a video that suits them, a character they identify with, and a scene that features the register, dialect, accent, etc. that they want to practice. Also, learners determine (through noticing) the particular language features that they work on.

That doesn't mean, however, that the project cannot be integrated into a classroom setting. Students can work in groups to choose a clip, find the script or transcribe it, and rehearse their lines. Ideally, they would be helping each other with difficult sections. A teacher can circulate to field questions from students on anything from pronunciation to grammar. After all, uptake is most likely when a student initiates a topic of discussion than when a teacher does (Roberts, 1995, citing Slimani, 1992).

The only stage of the project that needs to be done outside of class, in fact, is the recording of the voice-over itself. To produce a professional-quality recording, students need to work in a quiet room to eliminate background noise. The Multi-Purpose Rooms (MPRs) at KUIS are ideal for this purpose.

Shadowing

There has been some work done at KUIS that relates to this project. There is a project in the first-year IC program Pronunciation Unit in which students learn a technique called “shadowing”. Shadowing can take two forms; repeating after someone (either silently or aloud) or—with recorded material—reading or speaking along with them. IC students practice shadowing with a scene from a movie, and ultimately perform a live voice-over in class (the movie is played with the sound turned down). “Shadowing with movies helps students to develop fluency and improve their pronunciation. Based on student feedback, this project is one of the most effective and most enjoyable in the KUIS first-year IC program” (McMillan, 2008, p. 12). I have received interest in voice-over technology from IC teachers as it has the potential to enhance their shadowing project.

Copyright

For source footage, I have worked largely with copyrighted motion pictures on DVD and video podcasts available on the internet. Legally, the project can be defended under the Copyright Law of Japan. In Chapter II, Rights of Authors, there is a section on “Reproduction, etc. in schools and other educational institutions”:

Article 35. (1) A person who is in charge of teaching and those who are taught in a school or other educational institutions...may reproduce a work already made public if and to the extent deemed necessary for the purpose of use in the course of lessons...

The law does limit use to the classroom, however. Student voice-overs may not be

shown outside of class.

Research questions

Four research questions guided this study:

- a. Is it possible to record voice-overs using the equipment available at KUIS?
- b. Do students enjoy doing it?
- c. Does recording voice-overs facilitate language learning?
- d. Do the language-learning benefits justify the time commitment?

The study

The study took two years, and consisted of eight trials. I discuss each in detail below. Where no participants are mentioned, I was working alone—alternately as technician and participant/researcher. Where no data collection and analysis is mentioned, I was working informally based on observation and reflection.

Trial 1: The Big Lebowski

I conducted the first trial myself using a clip from the movie *The Big Lebowski*. I started off using *iMovie 2*, which was installed on the Macs in the Production room and MPRs. There was a significant technological glitch, however; video frames were dropped during audio recording. While the clip played smoothly during playback, when I clicked the audio record button, the video playback became choppy—it was not possible to read the actors' lips. This may have been either an *iMovie* glitch or a simple lack of RAM.

I continued the trial on the newer BEPP MacBook, which had iMovie HD installed on it. It also had more RAM. Either the newer software or the increased RAM solved the frame-loss problem and video playback during recording was smooth enough for lip reading. Unfortunately, I couldn't hear the original soundtrack while I was recording. It turned out that this was a limitation with both versions of iMovie. This meant that I had no real-time feedback on my delivery. I had to wait until I had my voice-over recorded to compare it with the original.

This method did, however, allow me to accomplish a decent voice-over—albeit in English, my native language. I was able to memorize the lines and mimic the actor's delivery fairly easily, having watched the scene a number of times. I wondered, though, how much more difficult that would have been in a second language.

Trial 2: Da Vinci podcast

For my next trial, I wanted to work with a language learner in their target language. I found a 3rd-year student volunteer who was interested in improving her English speaking. She chose to work with a video podcast about Leonardo da Vinci. Unfortunately, the narrator's face was not visible for large sections while they cut to photographs and graphics, and lip reading was not possible. And because she couldn't hear the original soundtrack when she was recording, it was very difficult for her to match the quick delivery of the narrator.

As a result of these technical limitations, my participant had to approach the voice-over line by line. This was not so straightforward in *iMovie* HD, as the control over audio tracks is quite limited. Often her short audio recordings ended up overlap-

ping because it wasn't possible to stop and start recording at very precise locations. In an informational interview, she confessed to being frustrated by the recording process and unhappy with the result.

Trial 3: Tokyo University podcast

For my next trial, I decided to try my luck as a language learner and picked a Japanese video: a Tokyo University podcast. I picked a one-minute segment of a lecture on anthropology. I wanted to record in one pass as opposed to line-by-line, which meant memorizing the dialogue. Although I did manage to memorize it, I wasn't too happy with the end product. It was too difficult to read the professor's lips as he was talking—I constantly found myself speaking too slowly. While lip-reading was possible in English, it proved too difficult in Japanese. Like my participant in Trial 2, I had no signal during the actual recording of the voice-over that I was speaking too slowly. I decided that it was imperative for me to be able to hear the original audio while recording.

Trial 4: Pirates of the Caribbean

I decided to see what was possible in Windows' *MovieMaker*. I chose a scene from *Pirates of the Caribbean* that I thought would be interesting because the accents are quite exaggerated. I was able to record a voice-over while listening to the background audio. I was able to play the clip back with the original audio only, with my voice-over only, or any combination of the two. In order to replace the original dialogue completely with my voice (i.e. mute the original audio track), however, I also lost the background audio that brought the outdoor scene to life. It lacked atmosphere without the sounds of the wind and the waves and birds calling in the

background. I decided I needed a program that had more functionality in the audio-editing department.

Trial 5: The Big Lebowski (revisited)

After a long period without any luck, I did find what I was looking for in Apple's *GarageBand* 3. An audio-editing program, *GarageBand* has an option for recording a score for a video (podcast in later *GarageBand* '08). This allowed me to get a video clip in and work with the audio in new ways. I was able to sample sections of the original background audio where there was no dialogue and loop them in order to preserve the atmosphere of the scene. I could then record my voice-over and have it come to life inside the movie.

I thus was able to add a background audio track to my *Big Lebowski* voiceover from Trial 1 with the sound of the waves and seagulls that really brought it to life.

Trial 6: Napoleon Dynamite

It had occurred to me that a voice-over could be rehearsed and performed in small groups. I decided to stage a group voice-over trial during a voice-overs workshop I gave at KUIS sponsored by the Teacher Development Network. I chose a scene from *Napoleon Dynamite* that I thought might be enjoyable for my colleagues. There were four characters in the scene, and I asked for four volunteers from the audience. They chose roles, and I gave each a copy of his lines in the scene. In front of the workshop audience, they rehearsed and recorded a group voice-over. Each had his own set of headphones, which I connected to the headphone jack with audio splitters, to hear the original dialogue. Because I had prepared a background

audio beforehand (preserving the wind, bird and bicycle sounds but deleting the dialogue) my colleagues' voice-over was a hit. Working in their L1, it was easy enough for them to perform on the spot.

Trial 7: Freshman English Film unit

The next step was to try group voiceovers with students in their L2. In my second year teaching Freshman English, I replaced the Film Unit video project with a voiceover project. In groups of four, students chose a (roughly) two-minute scene from a movie that had (roughly) four speaking parts. Each group member chose a role. Having access to only one computer running *GarageBand*, I acted as recording engineer.

I scheduled two lessons for rehearsal. In each rehearsal lesson, I scheduled 10 minutes of my time for each group. I set up in the classroom, and as each group came in, I recorded their voice-over. We usually had time for one or two takes, depending on how many times we listened back. The purpose was to familiarize learners with the equipment and process, and give them a chance to hear what their voice-overs sounded like. When a group wasn't scheduled to be with me in the classroom, they were to be practicing their lines together nearby—in an empty classroom, an MPR, etc.

In the next class, groups had one more 10-minute slot to record their final voice-over. I had been keeping old takes, so if a group didn't perform well on the final day we were able to go with a previous take. I invited groups to supply background music, and they enjoyed adding sound effects themselves as neces-

sary.

Since students didn't have to worry about the technical side of the voice-over, they had ample time to learn their lines and work on their delivery. The flipside, though, was the fact that they didn't learn how to record voice-overs themselves and wouldn't likely be able to continue recording voice-overs on their own after they left my class.

Trial 8: Genres of English flight-safety videos

In the spring of 2009, the Production Room and Media Plaza MPRs were outfitted with new iMacs running *GarageBand* '08. It was a great opportunity for students to record and edit their own voice-overs. In my Genres of English (SOGO) class, we were working on travel industry genres and I asked my students to record voiceovers for flight-safety videos.

I found four flight-safety videos from major airlines at www.youtube.com, and we formed four groups. Using the teacher computer and data projector, I demonstrated how to record a voiceover. I had created a manual for recording voice-overs in *GarageBand* 3, which I made available electronically. I then circulated and helped as necessary. Because the flight safety videos had only one speaker each, groups divided the videos into equal parts and each group member worked independently—the idea was that we could put all of the parts together once they were recorded.

The drawback of having groups working in the same room, of course, is that their

recordings suffer from background noise. This was tolerable during rehearsal, but to have good quality final recordings groups had to book an MPR.

After the project was completed and we had watched the final group voice-overs in class, I administered an online survey to get feedback from my students on the voice-over project. The survey was administered in Japanese, and I had a colleague translate the responses into English.

Below are the survey questions and results, with selected comments that represent the range of responses.

Trial 8 survey

1. a) Did you enjoy recording a voice-over in GarageBand?

Yes: 66.7%

No opinion: 25%

No: 8.3%

(n=12)

- b) Please explain your answer.

- Yes. It was fun to imitate the original voice. The activity itself was very new and interesting.
- Yes. It was hard to use it, but I was able to practice English in a different way I couldn't try.
- Yes. It was the kind of activity we could try only in class.
- Yes. I could do it by cooperating with my friends.

2. a) Did recording a voice-over in GarageBand help your English learning?

Yes: 83.3%

No opinion: 8.3%

No: 8.3%

(n=12)

b) Please explain your answer. (If you said yes, please give as many examples as you can.)

- Yes. I was able to study English pronunciation and intonation.
- Yes. I was able to know my pronunciation
- Yes. It was a good practice to keep up the natural speed of native speakers.
- Yes. It was a good opportunity to practice intonation, pronunciation, and accent. I was able to find my weak points. It was also a good listening practice.
- Yes. I was able to learn how difficult it was to say in English...being conscious of my pronunciation and intonation.
- Yes. By imitating native speaker's linking of words and intonation, my speaking has become more like original...
- Yes. It was a good way to study speaking and pronunciation.

3. Please share any other ideas or comments you have about recording voice-overs in GarageBand.

- We were lucky that one of us had a Mac at home, but it seemed hard for other groups.
- No opinion. Some parts of it were fun, but it was pain to do it and I didn't understand the purpose.
- Yes. It was new and fun since I had never used it in usual classes. However,

it wasn't easy because of a lot of troubles.

- I am not good at computer, so it was difficult.
- Recording itself was fun, but I wasted most of the time for troubles of Mac.
- Recording itself wasn't bad. However, because of the data disappearing problem and the painful work to synthesize the data, I can't say yes to the questions; I don't think there was an achievement of the language because of the technical defects of Mac. Especially this time, we spent most of the time to learn how to use Mac, and I felt the aspect of language learning was neglected. Although I don't disagree with the usefulness of recording activity for language learning, avoiding technical troubles and painful work, choosing materials to get students' interest (ex. a scene from a favorite movie) would have been helpful to raise our motivation.

Unfortunately, two groups had difficulties putting their individual voice-over files together in *GarageBand*—files would disappear suddenly after being imported. This was a considerable frustration for many students. This frustration comes out in the responses to question 3. One student said it would have been better to have a hard copy of the *GarageBand* manual in class. Overall, though, I think that students felt that recording voice-overs was at least a potentially enjoyable and worthwhile language-learning activity.

Findings

a. Is it possible to record voice-overs using the equipment available at KUIS?

Yes, on the (new) BEPP MacBook, in the Production Room and first-floor MPRs.

b. Do students enjoy doing it?

Yes, in general, although technical difficulties can detract from enjoyment.

c. Does recording voice-overs facilitate language learning?

Yes, according to my Genres of English students. Of course I'm just taking their word for it. A rigorous study of the language-learning benefits of voiceovers including before and after tests and a control group was beyond the scope of this project.

d. Do the language-learning benefits justify the time commitment?

Difficult question. For students who continue to record voiceovers on their own in the future, the initial time commitment will likely have been worthwhile. For those who don't, it may not be the best use of class time. Because recording a voiceover is a technologically challenging procedure, it is important that learners are properly trained with the hardware and software.

Technical challenges

Beyond the technical challenges that I have overcome (described above), there are some persistent problems inherent in the procedure, namely: finding clips; getting video into *GarageBand*; and putting *GarageBand* files together.

Finding clips

Depending on the video, it can be difficult to find good quality clips with speakers' faces visible and/or with background audio that can be recreated successfully. Because recreating background audio requires looping sections, it is important to

have sections where there is no dialogue or loud noises from which to sample.

Getting video into GarageBand

GarageBand will open any QuickTime-compatible files (I have had success with .mov and .mp4 files). For this project, I used a Windows-based program called DVD Shrink 3.2 to create a .vob file which I was able to convert to .mov or mp4 using another program called MPEG Streamclip. Using this method, however, it isn't possible to preserve the subtitles, which I would have liked to have had visible for students. At the time of writing, I have learned of a Mac-based program called HandBrake which will create .mp4 files directly from DVDs, with or without subtitles.

Putting GarageBand files together

It is possible to put individual GarageBand files together by exporting them one by one (under the "Share" menu select "Export movie to disk") and then importing them into a new GarageBand project. As mentioned above, however, this led to file disappearance for some unfortunate students.

Conclusion

Through eight trials, I eventually hit on a system which allowed learners to hear the original voices alongside their own while recording and listening back to their voice-overs—providing prompt, individualized, feedback on their delivery without requiring a teacher. Also, I was able to produce a final product where the learners' voices replaced the original dialogue, but the background audio remained relatively intact—preserving the atmosphere of the clip and making screenings more

engaging for a classroom audience.

I found that my participants enjoyed recording voiceovers and perceived language-learning benefits, although many experienced technological difficulties that were frustrating. At these moments, I observed target language use breaking down. Because recording a voiceover is a technologically challenging procedure, it is important that learners are properly trained with the hardware and software. Future trials will depend on lesson plans that integrate hardware and software training better with language-learning tasks.

Contact: dirk.mackenzie@yahoo.com

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